



Witzelsucht

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Summary:

People say Mike and Richie are doppelgängers. As Mike settles down in Derry, that's not the strangest thing they discover about each other.

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First they called him ‘the new new kid’. It was rare for a town like Derry to attract anything beyond bad rumors, so multiple families moving there within the space of a year was cause for intrigue. What caused even more intrigue was a supposed likeness between Mike and another freshman named Richie Tozier. The next thing they started calling him was ‘Richie Two’.

Mike didn’t really see it himself. Maybe they looked a bit similar, but Richie’s hair was short and disheveled where his own fell in broad straight waves, and Richie sported a pair of glasses so thick one could barely see the soft brown eyes hiding behind them. There was also the fact that Richie was a jerk who couldn’t take anything seriously. It was on this point that Mike particularly disliked his misbegotten nickname.

Richie loved to play it up for laughs, joking that Mike was his secret clone, or taking off his glasses and trying to assume Mike’s identity in front of teachers, inevitable failures of the ruse notwithstanding. When Mike told him in a lapse of judgment how the Hawkins bullies used to call him ‘frog-face’, Richie took up the mantle with glee.

Yet by some force of nominative determinism it was with Richie’s friends — the Losers’ Club — that ‘Richie Two’ ended up hanging. Even with his relatively rapid entry into their company, it was crushing to lose Lucas and Dustin and especially Will, who had looked up to Mike as a sort of role model. Here, he was just a loser among losers. There was no way anybody would be looking up to him.

He hated the way Richie would egg the group on into greater and greater delinquency, like the time they skipped history to launch bottle rockets by the river. Well, all of them save Ben, who would be dragged away from class by no earthly force.

Mike wished he had that kind of willpower, but Richie exerted an akratic pull that lured him away with a wink and a nudge and a promise of something wondrous.

He hated how Richie could just grab his cheek and call him “pussy” and he’d fall right back into the same perennial trap.

He especially hated how Richie always had something witty to say, even when there was nothing to be said. Every moment of pastoral beauty that dared show its head would be dashed against his grating sex jokes and buried in a shallow grave.

Richie loved to boast about his conquests, but Mike couldn't believe any girl would deign spend five minutes around him without bailing in disgust. Stan and Eddie remained cyphers when it came to divining Richie's facts from his fictions.

It therefore seemed like the usual unmoored theatrics when, one afternoon in early October, Mike and Richie found themselves sitting alone on the rock past the old millhouse and the latter started talking about Bev.

The other Losers were playing a bizarre, lopsided version of tag around the rotting specters of old machinery when the two of them decided to settle down in silence and take in the view for a change. The golden-hour haze painted each and every tree with its irrefutable presence, enriching their fall colors to a frenzy of peppercorn and pumpkin.

In the farthest distance, the Mahoosucs rose over the bloody river of trees, almost invisible against the wavering periwinkle of the sky. For all its problems, Derry sure beat Hawkins when it came to autumn.

Mike couldn't imagine Richie having an eye for nature, at least beyond the natural pleasures of the girls he sat behind in algebra or chemistry. Bringing up Beverly was indeed unsurprising. What Richie said, however, raised an eyebrow.

It wasn't anything about the bug-bites on her chest or about how her ass looked in denim or all the times he supposedly played tonsil hockey with her. It was calm, matter-of-fact, almost elegiac. He missed her.

Mike asked if he had a crush on her, like Ben and Bill. He surmised his feelings toward Eleven might be in the same genre of angst.

No, Richie said. She was just a girl. She was cool, but she'd always be tied down by stupid girl issues.

Mike asked him what he meant. By that time they were both staring

up at the near-cloudless sky, following the occasional sparrow or hawk, and he managed to sneak a glance at Richie before he answered. He was squinting from the channeled light of his glasses, but his face was soft and round and tranquil. Not like it usually was. The breeze tugged gently at the suburbs of his black hair.

Richie said he didn't know what he meant. What do you think, he asked.

Mike tried to wrack his brain and think back on the years in Hawkins. Maybe Richie was in the same state of mind as Lucas — jealous and suspicious at a perceived theft of his comrades. But Richie was so crass and salacious all the time it was hard to imagine him speaking from a place of naivety.

Mike thought then of Will Byers, and the phosphorus of understanding was stricken. When Will came running to him after their rescue, that embrace couldn't really be mapped onto friendship as the books and movies knew it. It was that particular unassuming male compassion that made the school call Will a faggot and a fairy.

Of course, the Derry bullies always piled the same abuse on Richie — he was a faggot with a bunch of faggot friends — but that never seemed more than a farcical appeal to an insult-du-jour, just as when Richie would yell back that they should blow each other and flash a middle finger.

Mike didn't really know what to say either. He knew being a faggot was something bad, but girls were also bad. How could that make sense?

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Slowly, a new paradigm emerged around Richie. He was still his blustering, bragging, ribald self, but he would also — especially in the rare times it was just the two of them — talk about girls and boys and friendships in a way that left Mike scratching his head, and feeling an unfamiliar anticipatory queasiness. Richie seemed really open around him in a way that his personality should belie, and much more than the 'new new kid' warranted.

Later that month, when after endless prostration and begging they

got their parents to agree to a camping trip, was one example. It hardly even classified as ‘camping’ when they were in a sorry-looking patch of woods less than five minutes from Derry’s residential area, but at the very least all houses and buildings were obscured; and if you ignored the sound of passing cars you could pretend to be deep in forgotten Adirondack old-growth.

When everyone else but Stan and Richie had gone to sleep, Mike walked away from the fire to take a leak. Stan was preoccupied with absently stirring the embers, but Richie dogged Mike to the edge of a putrefied log and stood beside him. Mike felt under his striped polo and began to silently unzip his jeans. Richie just reached down and dropped his drawers and briefs alike, stretching his arms behind his head while he peed with a baffling sort of pride at the clothes now limply circling his ankles.

Mike almost did a double take, but tried to convince himself it was just more of Richie’s brazen nonchalance. He even volunteered a joke to take off the edge, saying Richie was a proven liar.

I’m a grower, Richie fired back. And you’re one to talk.

Mike didn’t mean to hurt his feelings. As he let himself go over the corrugated bark, the weird queasiness reared up stronger than ever, but not where he thought his stomach was. Richie just pulled his pants back up and walked off without saying anything more.

* * *

The first time they kissed was in mid November, about a week before Thanksgiving. Derry had a long Indian Summer that year, but it was the last warm day of the season — undermined by a steady Atlantic rain. Bill always got depressive on rainy days as they reminded him of when Georgie died. Eddie’s mom insisted he stay in the house. Stan, Ben, and Mike Hanlon were all busy.

In the end, it was just Mike Wheeler who showed up at the door, hunching a raincoat over his loose hair as best he could while he waited for Richie to answer the bell.

When it was obvious nobody else was there, he felt nervous. He played well off the group, entertaining them with stories of Midwestern Americana, but one-on-one it was awkward to keep the

conversation running.

Richie didn't try to bust his balls or ignite any discussion though. After his sopping coat was hung up in the kitchen, Richie chauffeured Mike to a three-season porch where a faded oriental couch commanded the room.

Richie told Mike his old man was out and produced a quarter-full bottle of Jack Daniels. That would be their entertainment, he claimed. His dad would never know if they just filled back whatever they drank with water from the sink.

Mike had always stayed far away from alcohol before... stealing from a parent's stash was the purview of Nancy and her friends. It seemed wrong to betray his own platonic self-ideal, but he felt obligated to go along with Richie's scheme. After all, he was the only person who showed up to Richie's end-of-the-week party.

So he snuggled up beside Richie under a quilt and they passed the bottle back and forth, watching the rain through the screen with the same sort of silent contemplation one might watch a television program. The lights in the house were off, but the overcast sky lit up the room in a cool pastel-hue.

The darker it got, the drunker they got, until Mike could barely keep his head up under the burning weight behind his brow. After a bit of silly jaw gymnastics he became fascinated with Richie's shirt, a cheap-looking promotional for a local bicycle shop. The tagline was so saccharine, but he found it inexplicably funny, teetering over Richie's shoulder to get a better view.

Richie pressed the rim of the Jack Daniels bottle to his lips and gestured to the fact that it was completely empty beyond a barely-visible film of whiskey at the bottom. Both of them began giggling at the thought of trying to fill it back up with water and passing it off as untouched, and soon Mike had his own lips pressed against the rim's other side, trying to blow a baritone fluting sound.

Richie dropped the bottle onto the cushion between them, and all at once their lips were pressed together, ripe and wet and grinning from the booze.

Richie tasted like bubblegum and bathtub gin, a different universe from the reticent lemongrass of Eleven. With the plastic of Richie's glasses digging into his forehead, Mike closed his eyes and held on for much longer than he should have.

Years ago, Hawkins bullies once told him to kiss Will Byers, and he remembered the thought of kissing a boy being gross and unthinkable. At that age it didn't seem materially different from kissing a girl, but something about touching another boy's mouth was revolting compared to sweet and sugary femininity. Maybe it was the woozy hurricane spinning in his forehead, but this didn't feel gross at all. It felt safe and right.

When they broke away Richie started laughing harder than ever, and beneath the woven blanket he twisted his legs around Mike's in a game of drunken footsy. At some point they fell asleep to the rain's maudlin staccato, and Richie wasn't allowed to have friends over after that.

* * *

Mike and Richie were older still the first time they slept together. Of course, they had 'slept together' on many occasions in the past — camping adventures and birthday sleepovers and school trips and long car rides — but not *slept together* slept together.

Richie never talked about any of the times they kissed, at least not explicitly. But Mike saw him in a completely different light after that November evening, whether it was a behavioral change on Richie's part or merely a shift in his own perception.

He'd still tease Mike sometimes, and still loved to craft great cantos about his size and all the sophomore girls he'd bedded, but he seemed to defer to Mike more than ever, as if searching for his approval. Every time Richie told a joke, Mike would catch him looking at him to see if he was laughing.

Mike wasn't a fan of his humor, but he couldn't deny Richie's petty charms or the fact that he was just a bit enamored with him.

The kisses never seemed like they were related to anything. Just a strange little subroutine in the larger program of their lives, not

linked in any way to the grander infrastructure of adolescent existence. But this time, late at night in Mike's room after even Nancy had gone to sleep, Richie didn't seem satisfied with the usual blasé release.

It was, perhaps, a crime of opportunity. Richie was too lazy to bring pajamas, so they were both stripped down to just their underwear under the spring humidity. Mike's comforter was crumpled at the foot of the bed, and a lone white sheet was contorted around them.

Richie moved it gently so he could rub Mike's chest, thin and hard but toned from weekends of running and climbing. Mike almost wanted to moan, but was embarrassed at the effeminacy of such a display. Instead he rolled over until he was on top of the other boy, still kissing his mouth and jaw but also letting his long dark hair fall down around their faces like a curtain. Richie wasn't wearing his glasses this time, but it might have been for the best that neither of them could quite see where they were going.

With the same indulgent confidence as that evening in the forest, Mike felt Richie pulling Mike's underwear down the curve of his legs until it was stuck around his knees. He stood all the way up on the mattress to let it trail down off the end of his feet and toes, and watched Richie do the same.

For a moment he paused with his chin down, blushing at the absurdity of it all, but Richie took his cold hands and guided him back to his eager kisses, now firing across the bow of Mike's pectorals and shoulders.

Richie had a faint thistle of hairs between his thighs, but with a guilty downward glance Mike could still see him clearly, making him shiver despite the heat's oppressions. After all those shit-eating grins and jabs about autoerotica, here was Richie in a state unrecognizable to anyone outside the room. Swooning, generous... 'adventurous' was the only allele inherited from his usual disposition.

Mike asked if all the stories he told about girls were true. Richie asked him if it mattered.

Richie also asked him if he was some kind of gay faggot. No, Mike

said.

Richie said that was good, because he didn't want to do any faggot-type stuff.

As soon as he finished talking he resumed the kisses and sounded the depths of Mike's will. His unfettered hands drank Mike in like a braille porno.

Mike felt empowered as his fingernails dug into Richie's shoulder blades. The 'new new kid' was the only one who could wipe the stupid smug look off Richie's face and make him gasp and shyly bite his lips.

When they were both finished, Mike stretched in a serotonin afterglow. He could still feel the clammy sweat where his hand lay on Richie's pelvis and he knew it would be uncomfortable to slip back into underwear. Nobody else would understand what this all meant — how it didn't mean anything.

Laying his head to rest on Richie's chest, he brushed a lock of hair from Richie's forehead and told him he loved him. In the aftermath of the confession he could hear Richie's heartbeat calm from a stallion drumroll to an easy tick-tock.

Being around Richie seemed to toss a bunch of unrelated feelings together into an aperitif he didn't quite understand, and maybe that was love. He just knew it didn't mean anything.

* * *

The next thing they started calling him was 'Mike Wheeler'.

Ben and Bill kept pining over Bev. Stan seemed more reclusive than ever. Mike and Richie never really had a schedule; when they slept together it just happened out of convenience.

In their junior year, the Soviet Union fell and Richie started dating a girl. The couple seemed to get along well, but Richie would still bring Mike out to the millhouse rock from time to time and vent about 'stupid girl issues'. If they ever started kissing, Richie would say it's alright, because it didn't actually mean anything. It wasn't some gay romantic shit, he'd say, so it wasn't cheating.

His girlfriend was so tense, he'd complain, that it never felt good to kiss her. Despite his frog-face, Mike was always better.